

The Disquieting Muses

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always,
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father's twelve
Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:
"Thor¹ is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don't care!"
But those ladies broke the panes.

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song, I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
But, heavy-footed, stood aside
In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

¹ Norse god of thunder.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
 And praised my arabesques and trills
 Although each teacher found my touch
 Oddly wooden in spite of scales
 And the hours of practicing, my ear
 Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
 I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
 From muses unhired by you, dear mother,

I woke one day to see you, mother,
 Floating above me in bluest air
 On a green balloon bright with a million
 Flowers and bluebirds that never were
 Never, never, found anywhere.
 But the little planet bobbed away
 Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
 And I faced my traveling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
 They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
 Faces blank as the day I was born,
 Their shadows long in the setting sun
 That never brightens or goes down.
 And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
 Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
 Will betray the company I keep.

Words

Axes
 After whose stroke the wood rings,
 And the echoes!
 Echoes traveling
 Off from the center like horses.

The sap
 Wells like tears, like the
 Water striving

To re-establish its mirror
 Over the rock
 That drops and turns,
 A white skull,
 Eaten by weedy greens.
 Years later I
 Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,
 The indefatigable hoof-taps.
 While
 From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
 Govern a life.

Poppies in October

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.
 Nor the woman in the ambulance
 Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly—

A gift, a love gift
 Utterly unasked for
 By a sky

Palely and flamily
 Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes
 Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

O my God, what am I
 That these late mouths should cry open
 In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
 Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
 I am not cruel, only truthful—
 The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
 Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
 It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
 I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
 Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
 Searching my reaches for what she really is.
 Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
 I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
 She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
 I am important to her. She comes and goes.
 Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
 In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
 Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

The Applicant

First, are you our sort of person?
 Do you wear
 A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
 A brace or a hook,
 Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
 How can we give you a thing?
 Stop crying.
 Open your hand.

Empty? Empty. Here is a hand
 To fill it and willing
 To bring teacups and roll away headaches
 And do whatever you tell it.
 Will you marry it?
 It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
 And dissolve of sorrow.
 We make new stock from the salt.
 I notice you are stark naked.
 How about this suit—

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
 Will you marry it?
 It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
 Against fire and bombs through roof.
 Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
 I have the ticket for that.
 Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
 Well, what do you think of *that*?
 Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
 In fifty, gold.
 A living doll, everywhere you look.
 It can sew, it can cook,
 It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
 You have a hole, it's a poultice.
 You have an eye, it's an image.
 My boy, it's your last resort.
 Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

Fever 103

Pure? What does it mean?
 The tongues of hell
 Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerebus²
 Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
 Of licking clean
 The aguey³ tendon, the sin, the sin.
 The tinder cries.
 The indelible smell
 Of a snuffed candle!
 Love, love, the low smokes roll
 From me like Isadora's scarves,⁴ I'm in a fright
 One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.
 Such yellow sullen smokes
 Make their own element. They will not rise,
 But trundle⁵ round the globe
 Choking the aged and the meek,
 The weak
 Hothouse baby in its crib,
 The ghastly orchid
 Hanging its hanging garden in the air,
 Devilish leopard!
 Radiation turned it white
 And killed it in an hour.
 Greasing the bodies of adulterers
 Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
 The sin. The sin.
 Darling, all night
 I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
 The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.
 Three days. Three nights.
 Lemon water, chicken
 Water, water make me retch.
 I am too pure for you or anyone.
 Your body
 Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern—
 My head a moon
 Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
 Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

² Three-headed guard-dog of the dead in the Greek underworld

³ feverish

⁴ Isadora Duncan, an early Twentieth-Century dancer, died when her long scarf got caught in the wheels the convertible in which she rode

⁵ roll

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.
I think I am going up,
I think I may rise—
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I
Am a pure acetylene⁶
Virgin
Attended by roses,
By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him.
Not him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—
To Paradise.

⁶ bright, clear gas